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## The Future of V4

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# FOREWORD

In the recent years Central European Cooperation become one of the most important regional platform within the EU. In many fields, the Visegrad Countries managed to outpace their own role models: the Benelux and the Nordic Cooperation.

Although on a political level there is an overwhelming optimism currently, but in order to keep up the level of this Visegrad euphoria, the region has to finally deliver through the implementation of concrete projects. If we fail to implement the ongoing strategic projects or to convert the political willingness into new ones with meaningful economic impact, Visegrad can face a crisis similar to the post EU accession one.

The current issue of the *BiztPol Affairs* introduces some of the key dimensions and possibilities of the V4 cooperation. I was lucky to be the part of some of the most important initiatives introduced in this paper in the field of defence, foreign policy and economy in the last five years.

Being part of the Defence Austerity Visegrad 4 (DAV4) process from the beginning, it is spectacular how much the region developed on the field of defence and security. In a few years we have managed to convert the declarations to a concrete project. The Visegrad Battle Group is an important product of this cooperation, but unless we make some of its components permanent, or launch common procurement, education or regular military exercises on its basis it can easily become the dead end street of military cooperation.

When we have launched with my colleagues the project Central Europe: Fit for the Future, which results are reviewed in this issue we have seen that the Visegrad Countries failed to create a ground for regional cooperation of the business actors and grab the 'high-hanging fruits'. The future of the Central European cooperation lies in how much we can approach the issues of (non)competitive education, migration, the Roma issue, the transformation of social systems and the development of infrastructure through a regional approach.

I believe the recommendations of analyses in the *BiztPol Affairs* will help us in the development of the next phases of DAV4, Central Europe Fit for the Future and GLOBSEC seminars and help to better articulate Hungarian interests within the V4 cooperation.

Dániel BARTHA

# SNAPSHOT

## THE VISEGRÁD BATTLEGROUP — HOW TO MAKE USE OF IT BEYOND DEFENCE ISSUES?

Anikó MÉSZÁROS

### ABSTRACT

*It is a well-known phenomenon in the European Union that small member states can hardly represent their interests on their own. Acting as a group, however, as in the framework of a regional cooperation, has already proven to be effective in many different fields. The same is true for defence issues as well: Hungary as a single country would have difficulties with making its defence interests visible in the EU, while as a member of the Visegrád Group this visibility increases significantly. The decision to create the Visegrád Battlegroup is a step into this direction.*

*This paper argues that regional cooperation in the field of Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) of the European Union—such as formulating a battlegroup together—can have many advantages beyond the defence issues as well, as the example of some previous battlegroups proves. Therefore, even if at first sight investing energy into common EU defence projects might not seem to be worth the effort, the Visegrád Battlegroup can be and should be efficiently used as another instrument to represent the interests of its participants within the European Union and beyond.*

*The paper first gives a brief overview about the latest developments of CSDP, summarizes the battlegroup concept and the latest facts about the Visegrád Battlegroup in order to give a background. Then, it defines three possible policy options regarding the Visegrád Battlegroup. The paper's recommendation is to use the battlegroup in a "smart way": considering the possibilities and obstacles of the V4, the Visegrád Battlegroup should be used as a tool to promote the interests of the participating countries beyond the defence issues as well. In order to do so, the example of the Nordic Battlegroup is examined in detail. Finally, the paper defines and recommends some concrete steps as well.*

## ANALYSIS

*Overview: the background of the battlegroup concept*

In order to better see the opportunities and constraints of the Visegrád Battlegroup, it is necessary to take a quick look at the current state of European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in general, then in particular at the battlegroup concept and its position within the CSDP. Finally the facts about the Visegrád Battlegroup are summarized and the approach of the paper is defined before moving on to discuss the prospects.

*The current state of CSDP*

The European Council meeting, held on 19-20 December 2013, focused on the CSDP for the first time since the Lisbon Treaty was put into force. Politicians and analysts agreed that a summit dedicated to the CSDP is in itself a significant moment but nobody expected a big step forward in the field of common EU defence.<sup>1</sup>

Considering financial problems resulting from austerity measures all over Europe, and conceptual problems regarding the position of EU defence (related for example to NATO's role in the region), the Conclusions<sup>2</sup> agreed at the council meeting are seen as a modest success, and, more importantly, a way forward for EU Member States interested in promoting EU defence cooperation.

As expected, no ground-breaking reform was accepted during the council meeting, as the differing interests of Member States are still not harmonised. But the Conclusions provide guidelines in some important fields within defence cooperation.

*"...the European Council has identified a number of priority actions built around three axes: increasing the effectiveness, visibility and impact of CSDP; enhancing the development of capabilities and strengthening Europe's defence industry."<sup>3</sup>*

These priorities show the directions for interested EU Member States where to proceed—as opposed to other defence projects which have a lower chance for success because of the clash of interests. At the same time, these priorities do not require too much effort from the uninterested countries.

*The battlegroup concept*

The Council's Conclusions do not mention the battlegroup concept explicitly. It would not have served as very motivating for Member States because it is not a clear success story of CSDP.

The battlegroup concept started as an Anglo-French initiative, with the aim to develop rapid response capabilities in a way to enhance Europe's contribution to the NATO Response Force as well. Supported by Germany, the concept was presented on 10 February 2004 as part of the 2010 Headline Goal, and was finally launched on 22 November the same year. A single Battlegroup concept document was delivered in October 2006.<sup>4</sup>

Compared to the Helsinki Headline Goal (1999), where the aim was to develop a corps-size force (50-60 000 troops), the battlegroup concept was much more modest quantitatively. It calculated with battlegroups of 1500 troops, two of which would be on stand-by at the same time.

The battlegroups have to be more rapidly deployable, more mobile and more self-sustainable. A battlegroup includes a core battalion, combat support and combat service support to carry out peace-support, peace-enforcement, evacuation or humanitarian operations. It is operated by a framework nation or by a multinational coalition of Member States, but non-EU members can join as well. They have to be deployable within 10 days (following a Council decision) and be able to sustain operations for 30 days—which can be extended up to 120 days if resupplied appropriately.

At the time when the concept was launched, it had a high level of political support. Member States were ready to make commitments, 21 of them (plus Norway) offered to form a total of 13 battlegroups.<sup>5</sup>

The battlegroups reached full operational capability on 1 January 2007. Since then, two battlegroups are on standby for 6 months at a time, following a rotating schedule. Still, they have never been used. The main reason for this is the lack of political commitment by the Member States. Though they continue to offer capabilities and keep on forming new battlegroups, this remains the limit of their willingness. A deployment of the battlegroups (which would require the consent of all EU Member States) is above this limit. This situation raises serious doubts about the viability of the whole battlegroup concept. Therefore today it is often seen as a waste of money, time and energy, and a useless capability in general.<sup>6</sup>

True, the battlegroups have helped improving interoperability and effectiveness among the participants, and this experience proved to be useful in other contexts (such as NATO) as well, so the concept cannot be seen as a total failure. However, these are just minor successes compared to the fact that the battlegroups have not lived up to their initial purpose.

### *The Visegrád Battlegroup*

Despite the questionable success of the battlegroup concept, the Visegrád countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) have decided to formulate their battlegroup as well.

The concept requires continuous offerings from Member States to provide always new battlegroups. Countries apply on a voluntary basis and the participating countries of a battlegroup can join other states for their next one. The Visegrád countries have also participated in several different battlegroups in the past. The Czech Republic with Germany, Austria, Croatia and Ireland; Hungary with Italy and Slovenia; Poland and Slovakia with Germany, Latvia and Lithuania. The Weimar Battlegroup of Poland, Germany and France was on standby in 2013, while the Czech Republic and Slovakia provided the Czech-Slovak Battlegroup in 2009.

Looking at the composition of these battlegroups, often (but not necessarily) a geographical logic can be discovered, while at other times they were driven by political motives. Creating the Visegrád Battlegroup with the V4 countries serves both purposes.

The letter of intent on forming the Visegrád Battlegroup was signed on 6<sup>th</sup> March 2013 by the four countries' defence ministers at the Visegrád Group's summit in Warsaw.<sup>7</sup> They also decided that Poland would be the battlegroup's framework nation. According to the plans (although the final figures are not set yet), the whole unit would be a force of around 2500 troops, of which 1200 would be provided by Poland, 700 by the Czech Republic, 450 by Hungary and 400 by Slovakia.

The battlegroup will be on stand-by for rapid deployment in the first half of 2016. It will follow years of preparation, both legal (such as signing of agreements) and military (such as trainings and exercises).

The decision has significance from several aspects, but based on the arguments above, European defence in general is not one of them.

Therefore, in the author's opinion, when discussing the opportunities lying in the Visegrád Battlegroup, it should be regarded first and foremost as a tool of cooperation and advocacy of interests rather than a goal itself. If regarded as a goal, then it could be strongly debatable whether it is worth the effort, energy and money invested in the Visegrád Battlegroup, given the high probability of never being used.

This paper argues from this "tool" point of view: it underlines the importance of the battlegroup as an aforementioned tool of interest advocacy and cooperation. It examines the possible ways to use the Visegrád Battlegroup as a tool of strengthening cooperation among the participating countries and to pursue their interests in the European Union and beyond.

## OPTIONS

Considering the situation described above, the Visegrád countries have several options to choose from. Which approach to follow regarding the battlegroup depends on the four countries' priorities, goals, and very importantly, on their available resources as well.

### *"Good students"*

The Visegrád countries have a history with the approach of being "the good students". During the 1990s, when negotiating for EU and NATO membership, the V4 has managed to build a reputation of engaged and willing partners. It would be a viable option to count on this reputation. A properly organized, exemplary battlegroup could ring bells in the EU (and in NATO) about hardworking and reliable Central European countries.

Such a decision would have several advantages. Together with the above mentioned opportunity for brand-building, a well-equipped battlegroup would require the V4 to modernise at least parts of their national armies—which is long overdue. These modernised capacities would later come in handy also in the context of NATO commitments.

There are, however, serious obstacles behind this option as well. The most obvious one is the lack of money. Referring to the economic crisis and necessary austerity measures (just like the rest of Europe), all V4 countries (except Poland) are tightening their defence budgets. Therefore it would be

impossible to convince the four governments to build an “exemplary battlegroup”—that is, one with more than just the most necessary resources, using more money, time, and staff for organizing than what is really needed. It would be too high a cost only in order to show the credibility and commitment of the Visegrád Group.

Another obstacle is that the message might not come through as clear as expected. As described above, the EU battlegroups are nowadays seen as a partly failed project, forces that have never been used. Experts and decision-makers would recognise a well-built Visegrád Battlegroup but it would generate only limited attention, given that because of the lack of political will to deploy a battlegroup, most probably all the money and effort put into organizing the battlegroup would be left unused.

In short, creating the Visegrád Battlegroup with the “good student” approach would certainly have advantages, but given the context and the current situation of the V4, the costs would be higher than the benefits.

### *“Bad students”*

Considering the opinions about the viability of the battlegroup concept, being “bad students” can be another option. This does not seem to be the case, though, as in 2013 the Visegrád countries have voluntarily offered to form a battlegroup. Still, if the decision is made to change the course and focus their resources on other issues, a not-so-well organised battlegroup would have both benefits and drawbacks.

These are logically more or less the opposite of the previous option. Money and other resources would be spent to a limited level; defence budgets would not be burdened that much. At the same time, an opportunity to modernise national capabilities would be missed. Another opportunity to demonstrate the willingness and commitment of the V4 would be lost as well. This is especially important because the Visegrád countries are really in need to demonstrate their cooperation skills in defence issues.

If there is anything the Visegrád countries like in their group’s work, it is demonstrating their cooperation skills. Therefore, even if the battlegroups are not in the best shape nowadays, the V4 is still willing to take the opportunity. Backing out completely would cost too much loss of credibility, so it is not a viable option, but backing out half-way—that is, running the

battlegroup project with the minimum resources acceptable—also would have more drawbacks than benefits.

*“Smart students”*

The ideal way to go would combine the previously mentioned benefits: it would provide good press for the Visegrád countries, it would not cost too much but it would ensure modernisation which the V4 could later use as NATO members as well.

In the author’s opinion this is a goal possible to reach. It requires, however, an approach somewhat different from what the Visegrád Group is used to. In order to make the best out of it, they need to be the “smart students”, and a higher level of cooperation is needed.

Being the “smart students” means looking at the opportunity to form the Visegrád Battlegroup not as a goal but as a tool with several purposes. Since the success of the battlegroup concept is ambivalent, the Visegrád Battlegroup as a goal can be questionable. As a tool, however, it can be used in several ways—if used thoughtfully and creatively—on the one hand to develop other defence projects of the Visegrád Group (such as their engagement in NATO or the modernisation of their armies). On the other hand, a well-advertised battlegroup project can be a convincing proof of the V4 cooperation in general.

The biggest obstacle to this approach is the lack of trust in each other and the fear from partially losing sovereignty. The only way to reduce costs in the field of defence is sharing defence costs among countries. (In the EU terminology it is called “pooling and sharing”, while its equivalent in the NATO is “smart defence”.) However, cooperating even in defence research and development, not to mention for example relying on each other in air defence, requires a level of trust which is still missing in today’s Central Europe. This phenomenon can be explained with historical reasons but it is high time to pass beyond it. It is a long process but a smartly implemented Visegrád Battlegroup can be the first step.

## THE NORDIC BATTLEGROUP AS AN EXAMPLE

How to make the best out of the Visegrád Battlegroup, beyond the context of the European Union, even beyond defence issues? The example of the Nordic Battlegroup can give some inspiration.

The Nordic countries are often referred to as an ideal for Central Europe. Their high level of cooperation and developed approach to common issues is often seen as a way to follow. Although when it comes to membership in different organizations, the Nordic countries are diverse: while Iceland, Norway and Denmark are members of the NATO, Sweden and Finland are not. Similarly, Iceland and Norway are not EU-members.

Despite this diversity they have managed to establish the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO). Their willingness to cooperate in the field of defence issues is visible also when it comes to the EU battlegroups: Norway, as a non-EU member, has been contributing to the Nordic Battlegroup since the beginning.<sup>8</sup>

The Nordic Battlegroup was on stand-by already two times and is expected to do so a third time as well. In the first half of 2008, then in the first half of 2011, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Estonia, and Ireland joined to form the Nordic Battlegroup, with Sweden as the framework nation.

Although these countries joined other battlegroups as well and will continue to do so, the Nordic Battlegroup has become a brand. Once the battlegroup was formulated and the standby period was over, after analysing the experiences the participating countries concluded that it would be a waste of opportunity to dissolve the structure and let the gained experience go. Instead, parts of the structure were later used in other national or regional contexts, and the Nordic Battlegroup itself has become a regular contributor to the EU battlegroup project, a perfect example of the participants' defence cooperation skills, and another way to promote Nordic cooperation in general.

It is already decided that in 2015 Latvia and Lithuania will join the Nordic Battlegroup, thus all three Baltic states will become its members. This fits into the overall strategy of the Baltic countries to strengthen their cooperation with the Nordic states as much as possible, in order to increase their visibility in international politics and security issues. Joining the group of their well-developed neighbours and introducing the "Nordic-

Baltic” brand is indeed a smart and relatively cost-effective way of increasing such visibility, be it in the field of defence or elsewhere.

The Visegrád countries do not have their own “Nordics”, i.e. a more developed group of countries which have formed a successful regional cooperation and which can be followed or joined in order to share in their success. The Visegrád Group, however, represents a territory and population large enough to become a significant actor on its own as well.

When it comes to following the Nordic example of cooperation, the two most common counter-arguments are money and cultural-historical issues. The reason, however, why the Nordic Battlegroup has become a brand, is not the high amount of money spent on it but the multiple times it has been (and will be) on standby, that is, its regularity, and its ability to be used in other structures as well. The cultural-historical argument is often the reference to the long history of cooperation in Northern Europe, as opposed to a level of historical hostility in Central Europe. However, during the Cold War some northern countries were NATO-members, others neutral or even under Soviet influence, while the experiences of the Visegrád countries from the same era are so similar that this should not be a valid argument, and certainly not a serious obstacle to cooperation today.

## CONCLUSIONS: RECOMMENDATIONS

When it comes to discussions about the Visegrád Battlegroup, it is often concluded that the V4 defence cooperation is underdeveloped and the battlegroup, as their first major success in this field, should be used as a first step to build permanent common defence capabilities and to deepen defence cooperation in general.<sup>9</sup> While such arguments are certainly valid, real-life obstacles (such as lack of money or political will to spend on permanent capabilities) often do not let them become more than policy recommendations.

This paper instead focuses on some steps which should be taken in order to make the best out of the Visegrád Battlegroup beyond the EU and beyond defence issues only. This approach would make it possible to benefit more from the project by seeing it rather as a tool than as a goal, in order to pursue the V4’s interests in other fields as well.

- Once the battlegroup is formulated, the money spent should not be wasted. The created structure should be multifunctional and

applicable in the NATO's framework (such as NATO Response Force) as well.

- Any developments regarding defence issues should be carried out considering the recommendations of the EU Council meeting dedicated to CSDP. When modernising national forces, cooperation (such as common tenders, joint acquisition) should be seriously considered and rational arguments about cost-effectiveness should overcome historical mistrust.
- The same is valid for research and development projects as well as for plans regarding defence industries of the V4.
- These steps require a strengthened and fluent communication among the four countries about their defence plans, and not only on the highest (representative) level. These communication channels should become permanent.
- The Visegrád Battlegroup and its developments should be given as much as publicity possible, to demonstrate the willingness of the V4 countries to cooperate in the field of defence—which requires the highest level of trust in each other. This message will resonate not only within the EU but also in a NATO context.
- By introducing these measures, the commitment of the Visegrád Group in common European issues will be proven, thus increasing the V4's visibility and credibility in general, beyond defence issues as well.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: Javier SOLANA, "Globalizing European Security", *Project Syndicate*, December 16, 2013, accessed January 28, 2014, available at <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/javier-solana-argues-that-the-eu-s-common-defense-and-security-policy-should-play-a-key-role-in-ensuring-global-stability#ozu5VJR6DKYSEmId.99> or Marcin TERLIKOWSKI, "The EU's December Defence Summit: Towards Fragmentation of European Security?", *Bulletin PISM* no 139 (592), December 18, 2013, accessed January 28, 2014, available at <http://www.pism.pl/publications/bulletin/no-139-592>.

<sup>2</sup> European Council: Conclusions. EUCO 217/13, 19/20 December 2013, accessed January 28, 2014, available at [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/140245.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/140245.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Conclusions p.3.

<sup>4</sup> Council factsheet on EU Battlegroups. (Updated: April 2013), accessed January 28, 2014, available at [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressdata/en/esdp/91624.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/esdp/91624.pdf).

- <sup>5</sup> Jan Joel ANDERSSON, “Armed and Ready? The EU Battlegroup Concept and the Nordic Battlegroup”, SIEPS Reports 2006:2, *Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies*, Stockholm, March 2006, accessed January 28, 2014, available at <http://www.sieps.se/sites/default/files/32-20062.pdf>, p.22.
- <sup>6</sup> Anna BARCIKOWSKA, “EU Battlegroups — ready to go?” EUISS Briefs No40, *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, November 15, 2013, accessed January 28, 2014, available at [http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Brief\\_40\\_EU\\_Battlegroups.pdf](http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Brief_40_EU_Battlegroups.pdf).
- <sup>7</sup> Press Statement of the Polish Presidency in the Visegrad Group, March 6, 2013, accessed January 28, 2014, available at <https://www.premier.gov.pl/en/news/news/press-statement-of-the-polish-presidency-in-the-visegrad-group.html>.
- <sup>8</sup> ANDERSSON (2006) p.21.
- <sup>9</sup> See for example: Milan ŠUPLATA (ed.), “DAV4 II Report: From battlegroup to permanent structures”, *Central European Policy Institute*, November 18, 2013, accessed January 28, 2014, available at <http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/dav4-ii-report-battlegroup-permanent-structures>.

# SNAPSHOT

## THE ROLE OF THE VISEGRÁD COUNTRIES IN THE TRANSATLANTIC FUTURE<sup>1</sup>

Dániel BARTHA — Péter RADA

### ABSTRACT

*The European continent has not witnessed large scale violence, since the Balkan Wars. The threat perceptions changed accordingly in Europe. Most European allies believe that even the current crises with Moscow doesn't change the overall European security environment, but it proves, that Europe still needs the United States in maintaining security but also needs to substitute American resources in places which are important to the United States but may be abandoned in the future. Thus, Europe can prove that the Transatlantic Alliance is still important. The article assesses the consequences of the changing American foreign policy focus for the Visegrád countries. The article itself does not intend to give a full and comprehensive picture on all the possible scenarios for a joint Visegrád foreign policy initiative which would substitute effectively the waning American presence in Europe but it aims at highlighting the general strategic picture in Central and Eastern Europe and to provide an example for a joint effort.*

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<sup>1</sup> This article is the shortened and amended version of the Peter Rada's article from the Panorama 2013. Due to the recent European events many arguments of the original article are outdated. To see the original article: RADA, Peter, 2013. Pivot to Asia and the Role of the Visegrád Countries in the Transatlantic Future after 2014. In: ONDREJCSÁK, Robert et al (eds.), 2013. *Panorama of Global Security Environment 2013*. Bratislava, CENAA, pp. 121–136

## INTRODUCTION

Recently, the American foreign policy became overstretched and the burden-sharing questions became relevant again. (Magyarics, 2010) The rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific is rather an organic orientation back to a “normal” American global presence as the United States has always been both an Atlantic and a Pacific power. (Ondrejcsák, 2012, 25) The American foreign policy ambitions are limited by the financial crisis and the necessary budget cuts. Thus, it was necessary to give a new shape to the foreign policy and deliberate a changed focus. The false sentiment that the United States paid the most attention to Europe during the last decades was fed by the active American engagement in the transitions of Central and Eastern Europe, the NATO enlargement and the active participation in settling the Balkan Wars. (Haas, 2011) Before the Ukrainian crisis, the predictable developments in Europe gave more confidence to the American decision makers to place more responsibility on the European allies. Washington also had to put some pressure on its allies, to match or at least credibly support American defense commitments and capabilities within NATO. Unfortunately the US withdrawal, with the misinterpretation of the security challenges was rather used by politicians as an argument for further downsize armies and military budgets. In parallel NATO’s smart defense and Europe’s pooling and sharing program couldn’t create credible capabilities. There were warnings signs, such as the operation in Libya, that US support will be needed to European allies to conduct any bigger mission or operation, even on fields where Europeans have the strongest capabilities on paper (such as air force). It is clearly seen now that the United States needs to keep some troops in Europe to avoid further encouraging Russia to become even more animated towards Europe aiming at filling any real or perceived power vacuum in Eastern Europe in face of low resistance, which means Europe failed to create a credible power even for territorial defense.

The impression that Washington gave up Europe is false and is not in line with the real intentions of the Obama administration. (Ditrych, 2012, 52) The many ties between Europe and the United States continue to keep Europe as one of the central pillars of the American foreign policy. It is a false conclusion to consider Europe as a finished business. The European geopolitical order is more fragile than it is assumed in general. The fragility is fed by the ambiguity of the strategic future. The problem is even deepened by the fact that beyond the strategic foresight, also the common

threat perception is missing. This was clearly echoed in the first reactions on the Ukrainian crises by the European Allies. The fragmentation can be also seen among the lines of regional interests and ambitions. Without providing and supporting the possibility to likeminded countries to conduct defense planning, development and create strategies in smaller circles and clusters, the United States will find itself in a similar situation like now, when it has to return to the continent to create a realistic deterrence capability. Unfortunately, the fragmentation appeared among the V4 countries as well, and without further developments or at least stronger political ambitions towards the support of Eastern Partnership countries by the smaller Visegrad countries, this will challenge the Visegrad defense cooperation.

Even though, it is clear that the United States will not abandon Europe it is less predictable how Europe can fit in the new American global strategy. Obama's pledge of 1 billion USD to reassure European allies suggests a short-term US answer to the current question, as the money can fund the presence of only non-permanent structures by the end of 2015 (Chivvis, 2014). The commitment of US, most likely will strengthen the demand of raising military budgets as well. While Poland already announced a raise, Slovakia's Prime Minister at GLOBSEC 2014 excluded this possibility, while significant Czech and Hungarian leadership remained silent on this question. Meanwhile, the modernization of the weapon systems to replace Soviet systems is further delayed, which can end up in loosening strategic cultures and through that further eroded credibility of these countries. This problem may test the transatlantic bond with the Visegrad countries already at the Wales Summit.

The Lisbon Treaty provided at least institutional legitimacy for the more integrated development of the European foreign policy. However, the institutional decision making process is still too bureaucratic and complex through the overlapping domains of the Commission and the intergovernmental process of the Council. Furthermore, the foreign policy goals of the EU represent rather a wish list. (Bressand, 2011) Beyond that heavy burden, we need to take the note that the relation between the two sides of the Atlantic has always had multiple dimensions and the defense cooperation has meant only one of those. The real untearable bond is the trade and the foreign direct investments. The United States and Europe are mutually dependent on each other due to the enormous volume of these. Consequently, it is a clear mutual imperative to maintain security and

stability in the Atlantic region. (Techau, 2011) The economic anchor is strong and keeps the United States as a European power, even if physical military presence decreases. Nevertheless, fine-tuning the emphasis on mutual interests is as important as ever both for the United States and Europe.

## THE OPTIONS FOR CENTRAL EUROPE AND THE VISEGRÁD COUNTRIES

The international security environment has changed significantly and the American relative power and global leadership has been challenged by new emerging competitors. On the global level, China is perhaps the most important factor of this change and even Russia seems to be less important from Washington. Due to the same reason, Russia has become more active in its near abroad on the periphery of Washington's European allies. This Russian policy was extended into new and more sensitive territories of Europe by the current operations in Ukraine. To that happen numerous facts had to co-exist. The power vacuum of Ukraine and the perceived danger, that the Eastern Partnership program of the European Union will be successful in bonding some of the countries such as Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine on a longer term to Brussels, the relative weakness and political crises of the EU, as the consequence of the economic crises and the vacuum created by the withdrawal of US forces from Europe, was a unique reality and possibility for Moscow. This unique nature suggests that the crises with Russian can only temporary effect global security trends.

Even though, the sources of Atlanticism are deep in Central and Eastern Europe and stem from historical experiences: the United States was the power which toppled communism, facilitated integration and later balanced the other European powers. (Asmus et al, 2005, 203) Central and Eastern European countries may be the best allies of the United States within the NATO but today they are definitely not the most important ones. Thus, Central and Eastern Europeans should also reconsider their strategic assessments on security issues because comfortable institutional answers may be not ready in the future. (Mitchell et al, 2013) The United States has long functioned as security anchor also in the European neighborhood. As such, the United States cannot leave the region completely in a fortnight and coordinated strategic efforts (such as the Visegrád cooperation, see Balogh, 2012) may keep the United States further interested in providing

enabling support in protecting the European neighborhood to become a space for new geopolitical contest.

Today, the real interest of the Central Europeans and as such of the Visegrád countries<sup>2</sup> is the growing coherence, better functioning and clear division between the NATO and the EU. The slowed down integration process of the NATO and the EU is partly due to the decreasing trust between West and the East part of Europe. Being in the middle, the Visegrád countries are more sensible to any developments in this regard. Consequently, it is not surprising that the Central Europeans are still more cooperative than competitive with the United States. However, the support is not unlimited. Thus, having no global aspirations, the Visegrád countries, which are many times seen as troublemakers by the Western European EU members, need to prove that they are important partners. (Samson, 2011)

The Visegrád countries have been reliable contributors in many NATO led missions, most importantly in Afghanistan. In some regards, the Visegrád countries even performed beyond expectations and sent more troops relative to the size of their economies than many older allies. Thus, they were relevant partners for the United States. This condition will definitely change after 2014 even though all of the Visegrád countries already expressed their commitments to stay in Afghanistan in a different mission. (Nagy et al, 2013) Consequently, the fulfillment of the basic obligations within the NATO will be more important than ever. The defense spending is one of these crucial points. Obviously, there is a lot to do in this regard because except Poland the other three Visegrád countries are far from the informally agreed 2 per cent per GDP ratio. Despite the valued and strong defense cooperation between the United States and the Visegrád countries (Balogh, 2012) this fact always provides source for criticism even though many Western Europeans underachieve in this regard, too. On the other hand, because of the much stronger gravitational pull of the EU the label “best allies” is not as rewarding anymore for the Central Europeans. The Central European countries need to show that they understand today’s strategic international reality and the quid pro quo principles in order to maintain at least the American enabling protection or support. The Visegrád countries can, however, prove their willingness to participate in a

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<sup>2</sup> The article uses the labels Central and Eastern Europe and the Visegrád countries as some kind of synonyms. It is obviously an oversimplification but in terms of coordinated strategic decisions in foreign policy the Visegrád Cooperation and the Visegrád+ formats represent Central and Eastern Europe. (See similar argument in Ruzicka, 2012)

mutually beneficial global division of labor if they take a constructive role in managing and solving problems that are also defined as such by Washington but where the United States reasonably expects more of a readiness to act on the part of Europe. (Marton et al, 2013)

The actual homework for Europe and also for the Central Europeans is to figure out how to fill any real or perceived vacuum in the wake of smaller American presence. Europe needs to prove it has a strategic vision regarding these developments. As such, smaller regional blocks, as the Visegrád Cooperation<sup>3</sup> can take certain responsibilities with particular regard to the Western Balkans (Huszka, 2010) or to the EU's Eastern Partnership countries<sup>4</sup>. In line with the mutually shared American and European interests, the already significant Visegrád involvement in these regions means a real added value to the strategic retrenchment on the part of the United States and it sends signal to the EU that the Visegrád countries are willing to take an active role on resolving the strategic rebalance within the North Atlantic Alliance. The NATO necessarily has a role in these regions, too, and the organization must remain active (e.g. further expansion by letting new members in) even if the United States cannot afford the same efforts in Europe. In principle, it means more responsibility and more reliance on the European component of the NATO.

## CONCLUSIONS

The ties between the United States and Europe will definitely keep Washington's eye on Europe. The geopolitical situation shows that Europe is far from a finished business and but Europe needs to invest significantly more at least in maintaining its own security in order to sustain the relevance of the North Atlantic Alliance.

The NATO still has important role in providing security in Europe and in representing a global security forum. Thus, the members need to put joint effort in maintaining the strong alliance.

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<sup>3</sup> Associating the Visegrád countries with defense cooperation is rather new phenomenon and the group may provide a functioning platform or model on how to maintain NATO capabilities in a fiscally constrained environment. (Kron, 2010). The planned set up of the Visegrád EU Battle Group by 2016 is an example for both NATO's smart defense and the EU's pooling and sharing efforts. (Suplata, 2013)

<sup>4</sup> The EU's Eastern Partnership platform is important region for the V4 even though this article, mostly due to the page limits, argues for the growing importance of the Western Balkans.

Even though the pivot to Asia is not intentionally a pivot away from Europe it is rather a sobering recognition that in today's world any policy reorientation inevitable leads to changes in all the existing relations. The pivot means obviously significantly less American attention to Central and Eastern Europe, even though crises situations can change that for shorter periods. There will be serious criticism towards those members of the NATO which are not able to contribute more significantly to the mutual burdens in terms of for instance defence spending.

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# ESSAY

## POST-EU-ACCESSION VISEGRÁD COOPERATION — RESULTS, RHETORIC, PROSPECTS

András Máté LÁZÁR\*

### ABSTRACT

*While most of the attention in Europe is focused on what is happening in Ukraine, it feels somewhat inappropriate to write about international affairs without dealing with these events. Even more so, if the topic is the Visegrád Group<sup>1</sup>, since many aspects of the Ukrainian situation concern joint and individual interests of the V4 states and, from an analytical point of view, a crisis like this will provide an exciting case study about how, if at all, the Visegrád states can coordinate their steps in a critical situation. However, this comprehensive essay deals not with one topical issue or particular aspect of Visegrád cooperation, but examines what post-accession V4 cooperation actually consists of, how successful it has been and, most importantly, how it is seen and communicated by the political leaders who actually shape its future.*

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<sup>1</sup> All commonly used alternative names (Visegrád Cooperation, Visegrád Four, Visegrád Group, V4 or simply Visegrád) are used in this paper. “The Group” or “the Cooperation” also refers to the V4.

## INTRODUCTION

In general and in the Central European context, activities of regional groupings rarely appear in widely read articles, let alone come up in conversations amid the traditional popular indifference to foreign policy issues. However, cooperation in Central Europe has become and remains to be an everyday reality which cannot be overlooked when attempting to understand the region's internal and external relations or assessing its prospects. Although regional cooperation in Central Europe is not limited to the Visegrád Group, it is with purpose that the present paper deals with this grouping, accepting its description as the "most clearly defined initiative"<sup>1</sup> in the region. Despite the low V4-related popular awareness, comments about the alleged lack of tangible results and the once widespread, now obsolete scepticism about the initiative's post-accession staying power, the V4 did not fade or cease to be active. On the contrary, it shows considerable activity, directing attention to a new period of the evolution of what could be called the "Visegrád idea". This idea—just like every similar undefined and sentiment-related concept—should be treated carefully, but the evaluation that the V4 entered into the third decade of its existence "as a respected and efficient regional initiative, with a steadily improving reputation"<sup>2</sup> is no exaggeration, provided that its results are interpreted in the adequate context and are contrasted to realistic expectations. As far as the past few years are concerned, some claim that a renaissance or revival of the V4 has been going on: Visegrád "[came] crashing back onto the European scene", partly because of "the commonality of interests among regional policymaker establishments after a string of elections heralded an amenable constellation of mostly like-minded governments"<sup>3</sup> in 2010. At the same time, it is argued that the V4 "did not succeed in determining any priority of such an importance as was the integration into the EU and the NATO during the pre-accession period".<sup>4</sup> This prompts the question whether the Visegrád Group is, or will soon be, engaged in some kind of conscious or "latent" vision-making process, which would be logical considering that it has actively existed as an intra-EU grouping for almost ten years now. A number of articles explicitly outline the necessity of forming some kind of long-term vision or strategy for the V4. It is now a fact that the V4 survived the achievement of its strategic goals (EU and NATO integration) and carries on with meaningful activities, but this does not mean that the Group's future course is unambiguous and pre-determined.

The Group's existence and activities have been accepted as "business as usual" and the related discussion is increasingly shifting towards "what" and "how" questions from "why" and "yes or no" questions about the initiative's *raison d'être*. While in this newest chapter of its history, the V4's particular activities—which encompass many cooperation areas as included in official Visegrád declarations and other documents—are increasingly well-researched,<sup>5</sup> less attention seems to be paid to the characteristics, significance and future potential of the initiative as a whole. One consideration behind the choice of topic of the thesis on which this essay is based on was that the commonplace about how important immaterial factors, words and sentiment are in politics and international relations proves particularly true in the V4 context. In the absence of institutionalisation and automatised, binding mechanisms of cooperation, the place that the Visegrád Cooperation has in the mind-set of the Visegrád states' political leaders represents an important lead in assessing the Cooperation's prospects as well as an indicator of how successful or significant the V4 really is or can become. The thesis, therefore, examined not only what the V4's activities actually included and how successful cooperation was, but also how the academia and, more importantly, leaders of the Visegrád countries expressed their views about the initiative itself.

The research aimed to establish the validity of hypotheses about the V4 states' political leaders' communication about Visegrád, by examining a number of V4-related statements by the four countries' presidents and prime ministers in office between 2004 and 2013, which defined or described the Cooperation itself (and not only particular issues subject to cooperation). First, it was supposed that there existed a *Visegrád-related political discourse* in the sense that the leaders often made statements about Visegrád itself, describing its "nature", "essence", importance, successfulness and other features. Second, it was expected that the *V4-related statements examined were generally optimistic and enthusiastic*, often invoking sentimental factors like a sense of "togetherness" and "regional identity" in Central Europe, interpreting them as facilitators or even inevitable determiners of cooperation in the region. The third hypothesis was that there were substantial and/or stylistic *dividing lines in the V4-related communication*, depending on the respective leaders' national and political affiliation. The fourth hypothesis concerned the V4's alleged "renaissance" and views about the timeliness of creating a long-term "Visegrád vision" or strategy: it was expected that recent V4-related

statements of the leaders indeed reflected an *increase in the Group's importance, and confirmed the presence of a political intention to formulate some kind of vision for the V4* to secure its permanent existence as an intra-EU bloc and ensure the exploitation of its capacity, *but proposals for such a vision, strategy or a better characterised future role are yet unclear and undetailed.*

The present essay, an abridged version of parts of the original thesis, introduces briefly what post-EU-accession V4 cooperation consists of and how successful it can be considered, it presents results of the research on the leaders' V4-related statements and then summarises the thesis' conclusion.

### VISEGRÁD COOPERATION AT A GLANCE

For more than two decades now, the V4 countries have been involved in regional cooperation, the launching of which was described by the V4 Prime Ministers as an important event in the modern history of their nations and countries.<sup>6</sup> It is arguably “one of the liveliest regional initiatives in the European Union”, even if there is no self-evident answer as to what Visegrád's “essence” or significance may be and its successfulness is not above dispute. In the words of Tomáš Strážay, the V4's history “might disappoint both optimists and pessimists”<sup>7</sup>. Popular ignorance or interpretational confusion around the term ‘Visegrád Cooperation’ and its variants may be understandable. After all, it is not ordinary that a regional grouping is depicted as “intangible fog”<sup>8</sup> or a political leader deems it necessary to publicly differentiate it from a “political masonic lodge”.<sup>9</sup> It is doubtful whether defining what the V4 really is, or trying to identify some “underlying meaning” behind the cooperation, is possible at all and, as some parts of this essay will show, many descriptions compete in this respect. However, given the circumstances, pursuing a dialogue about “what to do” with Visegrád, how to interpret its successfulness and assess its prospects is increasingly important. Notably, the mere fact that the V4 still exists is an unexpected development, and it cannot be said that the initiative's history is free of hurdles. Besides, the V4 continues to deliver results even a decade after the strong pressure on Central European governments to demonstrate their ability for dialogue and cooperation—which was interpreted by many as the only or most important reason behind starting the V4—became irrelevant. Before turning to the topic of how the

“mysteriously” revived post-2004 Visegrád Cooperation is defined or described by those who examine it as academics, and by the leaders who fill the V4 framework with content and shape the initiative’s course, it may be essential to briefly answer the question what actually happens under the term Visegrád Cooperation.

A Central European regional cooperation initiative, the V4 was launched officially by the prime ministers of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, Hungary and Poland with the signing of a declaration known as the “Visegrad declaration” in 1991. Strictly speaking, the verb “launch” is correct while “establish” or “found” would not be, as the initiative is not an organisation and thus a legal entity. Cooperation among the participating countries in the V4 framework manifests itself, primarily but not exclusively, in the following: a) *declarations*, adopted at the highest political level, outlining the basis for and goals of cooperation, setting cooperation areas, priorities, objectives and also the structure and modalities of cooperation; b) *meetings at various levels and in various forms* between leaders, politicians, experts, authorities and various bodies of the Visegrád four and occasionally non-V4 countries at summits, working meetings, conferences, seminars and so on, with the aim of exchanging views and/or coordinate action in the wide range of issues which are of interest for the four states (including intra-EU coordination before summits, decisions etc.); c) *the International Visegrad Fund*, the V4’s only institution, which aims to strengthen the cooperation’s “civic dimension” and plays an important role in the V4’s external activities, by financing cultural, scientific, educational etc. projects in and around the Visegrád region; d) *defence-related cooperation*; and e) the maintaining of a so-called *Visegrad House*<sup>10</sup> in South Africa (used jointly by the local embassies to perform consular activities and organise events), with the establishment of a new “joint representative office” in Vietnam having been announced in October 2013.<sup>11</sup> While not a separate type or field of V4 endeavour, external *brand-building* for the Central European region, and all Visegrád-activities that concern building or maintaining *relations with non-V4 actors* including states, organisations, societies and so on, are also increasingly important.

Although the V4 is not an international organisation, it has a “quasi-institutional backbone” in the form of declarations and other documents adopted at high-level meetings of the four countries’ leaders: the “Visegrad Declaration” of 1991; a document entitled “The Contents of Visegrad Cooperation”, signed by the four prime ministers in Bratislava in 1999; a

document on the “Role of Presidency of the Visegrad Group”, attached to the previous declaration as an annex in 2002; the second “Visegrad Declaration” known also as the “Kroměříž Declaration”, issued after the participating states’ EU accession in May 2004 (with the “Guidelines on the Future Areas of Visegrad Cooperation” attached); and the “Bratislava Declaration”, the V4’s most recent comprehensive document, signed by the prime ministers in 2011 on the occasion of the Group’s twentieth anniversary. These “quasi-strategies” include remarks about the situation and challenges in Europe and Central Europe, list objectives, priorities and practical steps of cooperation to be taken, and set the loose cooperation framework to be followed. Among the declarations there are shorter and more general ones, but it is fair to say that each document, including the first declaration, contains distinct goals and areas of mutual attention and interests, as well as elements of a symbolic nature, with the former usually outweighing the latter. The declarations show a trend of concretisation and practical conceptualisation, and they also show continuity, they refer to and build on the content of previous documents, highlighting successes achieved along the way, and indicating where continued cooperation seems promising and feasible. From the perspective of evaluating the V4’s actual results, these declarations’ significance is that they show a continuous political will to pursue a kind of cooperation that goes well beyond PR-handshakes. The fact that several consecutive governments have in fact contributed to this process of laying down mutual commitments and assigning a cooperation structure to support their realisation is significant political performance in itself, and gives something real to look at for those asking for Visegrád’s actual achievements. So does another, even more concrete measure of cooperation: the sheer *number and frequency of meetings* through which Visegrád primarily operates. Within the Visegrád framework, the V4’s prime ministers, heads of states, ministers, government officials, politicians, experts and other individuals and groups have met countless times.<sup>12</sup> By today, counting also the events not listed in the official chronology, it is safe to say that the number of various meetings between leaders and other actors from the V4 countries under the auspices of V4 is well above 400. This number is significant even without considering the content and output of all meetings, as it highlights continuity in motivation behind the actual cooperation: in the absence of formal requirements and legal obligations, more and more actors have been involved in exchanges of view and smaller or larger scale coordination. Arguably, the meetings have contributed to creating an informal but long

lasting 'V4-conscious' network of individual participants, which is easily interpretable as implicit added value, even if it may be hard to sell as tangible or spectacular. Although with different levels of actors, a similar effect is being realised through the *International Visegrad Group's (IVF)* activities, involving the civil sphere of the V4 countries and others in the broader region that is of interest for Visegrád's external activities. Promoting development of closer cooperation among the V4 and strengthening "the ties among people in the region", the IVF funds "common cultural, scientific, research and educational projects, youth exchanges, promotion of tourism and crossborder cooperation."<sup>13</sup> The number and scope of projects as well as the issue of financing serve as further markers of the cooperation's intensity: according to the IVF's summary, more than 3700 grant projects and 1700 scholarships and artist residencies were supported as of the end of 2012, and the IVF's yearly budget, composed of equal contributions of the V4, rose from 3.2 million euros in 2006 to 7 million euros in 2012, with the total worth of the projects' funding around 47 million euros.<sup>14</sup>

#### POST-ACCESSION VISEGRÁD COOPERATION: AN UNEXPECTED REVIVAL

Visegrád is now ten years into its newest period of existence as a grouping of states that are all full-fledged members of the EU. When trying to evaluate the V4's current situation, the way its chances looked like in the run-up to the 2004 EU-enlargement has to be remembered. The "breakdowns" or "setbacks" in cooperation, usually attributed to competitive attitude and national ambitions overwriting the idea of solidarity and coordination in the EU-accession negotiations, prompted many to seriously doubt the V4's mere survival. The problems were not as insignificant as they might seem in retrospect: some wrote about the "most painful and most illuminating failure of Central European cooperation"<sup>15</sup>, while some went as far as envisioning the end of Central Europe.<sup>16</sup> Beside general scepticism about the V4's ability to survive these problems, the EU-accession of the Visegrád states meant the accomplishment of the most important goals the V4 had worked for. It was to the surprise of many that the V4 survived the gloomy pre-accession period and, most importantly, cooperation was renewed after the turning point brought about by the realisation of Visegrád's "strategic" goals. Note that the cooperation's persistent activity comes despite the fact that the "eastern threat"—a

shared legacy of post-Communist Central Europe—once perceived so vividly is long gone, the political and economic transition has been completed, and the EU- and NATO-accessions rendered the cooperation's main goals obsolete. To be sure, the Visegrád states have had to adapt to the changed environment and it is true that the “internal dynamics of EU decision-making, the changing voting alliances [...] have created pressures on V4 countries, which arguably have similar interests, to cooperate” and this acted as a catalyst to increase cooperation,<sup>17</sup> but the V4's post-EU-accession renewal can be considered a milestone from the aspect of motivation, too. As opposed to earlier when the cooperation was born “out of external pressure and internal fear”, the V4 started to focus on acquiring and realising the culture of “voluntary cooperation recognised out of inner necessity”, so the main significance of this revival was indeed that it “confirmed that [...] Central Europe's political dimension can be nothing but cooperation”.<sup>18</sup>

Within the cooperation areas of the post-2004 cooperation framework, set primarily by the 2004 Kroměříž Declaration (the first post-accession “quasi-strategy”) and the 2011 Bratislava Declaration (the V4's most recent comprehensive document), a wide range of old and new activities have been and still are being realised. Instead of presenting a lengthy enumeration for which the confines of this paper do not allow, the essay merely offers the author's view on the successfulness of post-accession V4 cooperation, so as to introduce the context in which Visegrád-related political statements should be interpreted. In an attempt to assess the Cooperation's actual successfulness objectively, the thesis this essay is based on thoroughly examined literature, official reports and other sources about the V4's post-2004 activities. Visegrád Cooperation is primarily understood in this essay as a framework which is or is not taken seriously and filled with meaningful content depending on the intentions of decision makers and lower level actors involved. The thesis argued that, to determine whether the V4 can actually be considered successful, its activities should be examined by looking at whether certain minimum and optimum requirements are being met. *The minimum requirement concerns the input side of cooperation:* it is being met provided the four states' representatives take the cooperative structures seriously by ensuring regular participation and producing actual input. This can, of course, mean one thing at high-level political talks and completely different things at lower level expert meetings or other types of activities. Under no circumstances does the word ‘minimum’ does refer to

the level of effort that has to be made to meet this requirement: ensuring the parties' meaningful input demands constant commitment and actual resources, which are not evidently given in the case of any regional grouping. 'Minimum' only implies that, without this requirement being met, it is impossible to talk about cooperation in the strict sense, let alone successful cooperation. *The optimum requirement concerns the output attributable to activities under the cooperation framework*: it is met when the planned activities not only take place but also produce substantial output, to the satisfaction of all four states, whether this output be a joint statement, a decision of principle, successful joint lobbying, any minor practical result, the strengthening of the V4 brand and so on. Obviously, it is easier to give an account of the extent to which the minimum requirement is met, while measuring the realisation of the optimum requirement is much more problematic, but evaluations ignoring the examination of said requirements are prone to contain only shallow criticism or, on the contrary, wishful thinking and idealistic optative statements about the V4. Based on the mass of facts available, the thesis concluded that, *in the post-accession period of Visegrád Cooperation, the minimum requirement mentioned above is definitely and spectacularly met. As far as the optimum requirement is concerned, the question whether it is usually being met in the post-2004 period can be answered with a cautious yes*, considering that the post-accession period is not free from disagreements occasionally hindering substantial output (see, for instance, the divergent stances on the Lisbon treaty, US anti-missile defence system, the Georgian conflict, Kosovo etc.). Along the civic and cultural dimension, the increasing scope and depth of IVF activities which are pursued methodically, following goals set by the V4 foreign ministers, clearly indicate success and represent the most tangible V4 results. As regards intra-EU cooperation it is statistically "traceable" that consultation mechanisms emerged as permanent tools for coordination in cases when the given issue proved to be of common interest; and concrete results, even if lower scale or partial, are also presentable. In terms of foreign relations, the countless meetings with various external partners represent added value in themselves but have also lead to concrete new initiatives. Also, it seems that the Visegrád countries take their determination to "become ambassadors of countries awaiting integration with the European Union"<sup>19</sup> seriously.

POST-ACCESSION V4 IN POLITICAL RHETORIC:  
A COMMON VOICE IN CENTRAL EUROPE?

The V4 has been described and evaluated a hundred times in many different ways. Some find it easy to criticise it for the perceived lack of real content and value, while others applaud its continued existence or even a perceived increase of significance as the long-awaited manifestation of the recognition of a “common Central European” fate. In any case, the V4 has been and continues to be active in the conceivable future, and the initiative’s course will primarily (although not exclusively) be determined by the perceptions and decisions of actors who influence the Visegrád states’ politics: first and foremost the countries’ political leaders. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis about the Group should include the examination of V4-related communication of the most influential actors. In the following, the essay presents research results about how the Visegrád Cooperation appeared in the statements of the V4 countries’ prime ministers and presidents in office between 2004 and 2013, then it summarises the conclusion of a comprehensive research into post-accession V4 cooperation including the changing perceptions about the initiative. The research aimed to find the greatest possible number of publicly available, specifically Visegrad-related statements by the V4 countries’ prime ministers (hereafter: PM) and presidents in the period in question. After hundreds of statements broadly related to the Visegrád Group were gathered, statements suitable for research purposes were analysed from different aspects in order to prove the hypotheses (see introduction). Evidently, finding each and every relevant statement made by the examined actors since 2004 could not be the goal of the research; the aim was rather to be as representative as possible by finding sources in all categories, i.e. from every government term, from all four countries and from both “political families”. Fifty statements—including statements from almost all PMs and presidents, and statements from every year—were eventually analysed and the findings presented below reflect the content and characteristics of these.

*General findings*

The research did yield results, even though they were less spectacular than expected. The first goal was to find out whether statements about the V4 itself (its characteristics, significance, perspectives, etc.) were made by the

examined actors at all. The answer was positive, as statements meeting the research criteria have been found from nearly every actor examined, but to the question whether the statements constituted a “contiguous discourse” and thus gave grounds for talking about “Visegrád-rhetoric” as such, a negative answer was given. *There was no real high-level political discourse about the V4 itself, at least publicly*, meaning that the number of statements directly dealing with the nature, characteristics and prospects of the V4 was relatively very low. Moreover, the relevant statements were usually short and not very detailed. As regards the question whether V4-related statements suggested a consistent attitude or divergent attitudes to the Cooperation (optimism, pessimism/scepticism or neutrality), research showed that the *leaders’ communication about Visegrád did not involve strong or passionate statements, but was characterised by overall satisfaction or optimism as to the initiative’s importance, necessity and usefulness*. An apt summary by a Hungarian scholar was thus partly verified by research in the field of high politics: the V4 seems to have “many lukewarm supporters and only a few rock-solid enemies”.<sup>20</sup> The second part of this assessment was disproved: most of the statements were decisively positive about the results, necessity, significance and future prospects of the V4, and none was decisively negative, although there are slight differences between more and less enthusiastic opinions. The only negative statements or references to problems were connected to bilateral conflicts unrelated or only marginally related to the V4, as exemplified by disputes between the Hungarian and Slovak prime ministers.<sup>21</sup> In one case bilateral tensions were mentioned in the context of the V4’s successfulness: in a diplomatically worded statement, Slovakian PM Radičova in summer 2010 said that she found some steps of the Hungarian government “unusual”, with which Czech PM Petr Nečas agreed, saying “unilateral steps by the Hungarian government not only do not help improve bilateral relations, but the tension created may jeopardise common [V4] endeavours aimed at tackling the economic crisis”.<sup>22</sup> In the same context, Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán said that “Hungarian diplomacy could not be expected to be the main engine of cooperation” because of the conflicts but Hungary must remain part of the V4 which “met considerable demand”, acknowledging “with due humbleness” that there were debates.<sup>23</sup> In the Slovak–Hungarian relation, however, signs of rapprochement followed later: after meeting with his Slovak counterpart Robert Fico in summer 2013, Orbán talked about “opening a new chapter in the shared history of the two countries”, saying the relationship between the two states was based on “political and

personal trust". Fico was also hopeful that successful years were ahead, adding that "Central European countries should cooperate more closely than earlier".<sup>24</sup> Negative sentences (not statements evaluating the V4 negatively) have been made concerning the V4's institutionalisation and enlargement. For example, in a meeting between Czech president Miloš Zeman and his Slovak counterpart Ivan Gašparovič in 2013, Zeman stated he supported the V4's enlargement with Slovenia, but Gašparovič opposed that because conclusion had never been reached on the issue of enlarging the V4, a "reputed and important brand in Europe", which should rather continue cooperation in the traditional alignment.<sup>25</sup> Earlier, Slovak PM Fico had expressed the same opinion in 2007, saying that the V4 had "high political added value" so there was "no reason to enlarge it".<sup>26</sup>

Another research question was whether trends in V4-related political communication in the examined period were observable (increase or decrease in intensity, detailedness, etc.). It was found that *there had not been any spectacular change in the post-2004 period as regards content, style or frequency*. In individual cases, however, changes in Visegrád's acceptance were apparent, exemplified by the case of former Czech president Václav Klaus, who had been outspokenly critical and sceptic about Visegrád, but later became a moderate supporter. Klaus (in office first between 1992 and 1997) once considered the V4 to be an "artificial product of the West",<sup>27</sup> and he "openly opposed the concept of any such political grouping, preferring instead to focus exclusively on economic cooperation".<sup>28</sup> In as late as 2003 he called the V4 a "tenth rate initiative at best" from the Polish and Czech perspective, and said other organisations such as CEFTA were more important because they had concrete content and goals.<sup>29</sup> His views seem to have changed: in 2011 he appraised the twenty years of V4 cooperation and said that it had contributed to "strengthening the friendship" between the four countries.<sup>30</sup> Explaining his earlier views he stated that he was only "rejecting the idea of the V4 as a substitution for the countries' full-fledged membership of western institutions" because "western partners hesitated to promise EU and NATO membership" to the four countries, but after the EU-accession the V4 acquired a new foreign political dimension and permitted the formulation of joint interests and priorities as well as their promotion on the international level.<sup>31</sup> Another statement suggesting a change in perception about Visegrád's role was from Slovak PM Fico who said in 2013 that when he had first attended a V4 summit in 2006, it was "a formal meeting without proper content" but later

the cooperation was becoming increasingly pragmatic and rational, with the participating countries “making competent and important decisions” in the V4 framework.<sup>32</sup> In fact, these remarks refer to a general increase in the V4’s acceptance and also suggest that the cooperation is “maturing” both structurally and content-wise.

*Communication about the V4’s characteristics and  
successfulness*

Unlike scholarly works, the political leaders’ *V4-related statements in the examined period have not really attempted to define what the V4 was*, but descriptions about the V4’s characteristics, necessity and successfulness have often been made. Some clarifying statements were formulated about what the V4 was *not*. Czech PM Petr Nečas, for example, underlined that fears of a central European alliance within the EU were unfounded, and referred to the V4 as a “natural grouping of countries with similar interests based on their culture and history”.<sup>33</sup> In general, the actors examined spoke highly of the V4 and acknowledged its successfulness and necessity. Around the time of the V4 states’ EU-entry, several statements lauded the Cooperation’s role in achieving the important goal of accession, even though some are convinced that, had the Four been able to coordinate more successfully, accession conditions could have been much better.<sup>34</sup> There was wide agreement that the post-accession V4 should be maintained with an ever-renewed content; statements by Hungarian president Ferenc Mádl and his Czech counterpart Vladimír Špidla in 2004 (the V4 should continue cooperating and be adjusted to the new environment “based on common interest but also relying on natural relations stemming from a shared culture and history”, developed flexibly<sup>35</sup>) represented an approach shared by actors with various political backgrounds, from all four states. In the post-accession context, the tone of rhetoric remained to be positive: the V4 was described, among others, as successful, versatile and rich cooperation (Polish president Kwaśniewski, 2005), and a sound platform for the coordination of positions in numerous areas (Czech PM Petr Nečas, 2012), which represents high political added value (Slovak PM Fico, 2007). In the EU-context, the V4 was considered an exemplary cooperation project for the whole EU (Polish PM Donald Tusk, 2010). The importance of solidarity was referred to in several Visegrád-related statements.

It was expected that post-2004 V4-related communication of the leaders would frequently involve references to the V4's specialness and underlying (non-political) factors that facilitate or even predetermine cooperation. Although some statements did include such elements, overall, *the politicians' approach towards the Cooperation proved to be mostly practical, restrained, and focussed on objective interests and potential practical benefits of mutual cooperation rather than sentiment*. The exceptions included references to the V4's role in strengthening the "Central European region's identity", and the significance of this identity. For instance, Polish president Komorowski said in 2011 that the V4 contributes to creating a Central European identity which could help the V4 states "find their place in the EU"<sup>36</sup>. In this context, a strong statement was made in 2011 by former Hungarian president Pál Schmitt who said "regional cooperation had no alternative" and the Visegrád countries were in an "interdependent relationship from geographic, historical and economic aspects."<sup>37</sup> This interconnectedness, however, has been a less decisive element in the statements than expected.

### *Dividing lines in Visegrád-related rhetoric?*

The research also aimed to find if there were considerable stylistic or substantial differences between statements of the political leaders about Visegrád in the post-2004 period based on national belonging or political affiliation. During the history of Visegrád Cooperation, certain political actors have been expressly optimistic, while others have been, to put it mildly, sceptic about the V4. Strongly expressed individual opinions of leaders may occasionally have created the perception that there were "national V4 attitudes" influencing the level of engagement and activity of the respective state in the cooperation, and thus the future of the whole initiative. This perception is reflected by statements such as "Visegrád was often depicted in Bratislava [under Vladimir Mečiar's government] as either a Czech plot to re-establish control over Slovakia or a Hungarian plan to annex Slovak territory", or "Czech governments were also Visegrád-sceptics [...], they did not want V4 to overshadow their efforts and progress [...] and to be dragged backwards into some neutral post-communist zone."<sup>38</sup> While there obviously are disagreements among the leaders about particular issues of regional, European or global significance, the research aimed to found whether pro-Visegrád or anti-Visegrád attitudes are in correlation with national or political affiliation. As for national affiliation

(noting that statements which could be labelled Visegrád-sceptic in any sense have been very rare in the first place) it was found that *there were no significant differences between V4-related statements of the examined actors in the post-accession period connected to national belonging. Even though there are states that had been thought of as “traditionally” pro-Visegrád or Visegrád-sceptic, high-level Visegrád-related rhetoric after 2004 did not reflect these alleged differences.*

As regards politics, it has often been observed that the “volatility of the V4 countries is proving to be a fundamental weak point in their cooperation” because the “balance of seats in the individual parliaments can vary tremendously from one election to another”, and consequently “foreign policy focus and attitudes to the Visegrád Group can change after every election” which makes the initiative’s non-institutionalised character a possible problem.<sup>39</sup> Others rightly add that the cooperation’s dependence on domestic politics and the political cycles “has not changed the reality that in the end, the spirit of cooperation in the region outweighed the negativities.”<sup>40</sup> Hamberger offered a concrete example about attitudes to the V4 in the context of domestic (Hungarian) politics and wrote that, in political debates, conservatives “tended to favour strengthening the country’s commitment to the V4 platform” while the Left “tended to adopt more openly anti-Visegrád EU policies.”<sup>41</sup> Research found that, similarly to national belonging, political affiliation did not seem to determine the content or style of V4-related statements either. Overtly enthusiastic, moderately optimistic and cautious, restrained statements have been made by actors belonging to the political left and the right alike. (Cases when bilateral tensions were mentioned in the V4 context were also not connected to only one or the other side.)

### *The V4’s renaissance: expectations and rhetoric*

Discovering whether the V4’s alleged renaissance and new impetus after 2010 was apparent based on the actual communication of the four states’ leaders was also among the goals of the research. It was also examined whether V4-related rhetoric suggested an intention among the examined actors to start conceiving a vision or strategy for the V4, a step proposed and awaited by some scholars, and also whether any concrete proposals for such a vision were deductible from the statements. As mentioned in the introduction, many saw the election of governments commonly considered

as centre-right in 2010 as a turn giving new impetus to the Visegrád Cooperation, given that all four governments shared a similar agenda and believed they could “amplify their voice in Washington, Brussels, and within international organizations by acting in unison”.<sup>42</sup> It was also frequently underlined around that time that the importance of Central Europe would increase and the region’s possibilities would broaden due to the Polish and Hungarian EU presidencies, which would “provide greater opportunities for bringing their priorities forward.”<sup>43</sup> A demonstrative example was a high-sounding statement in a press release by the European People’s Party (EPP) group, saying “2011 will be shaped by Central Europe. Central Europe has shared interests, history and cultural affinity. The subsequent Hungarian and Polish Presidencies should assure that Central Europe is present not only geographically as the eastern flank of the EU but also as a political actor.”<sup>44</sup> Some authors claimed no less than the V4 countries were in a promising position because they still had the “vigour and dynamism” that mostly had “evaporated from the older member states”.<sup>45</sup>

The research has shown that, while mainstream V4-related statements had already been positive before the 2010 government changes, *the post-2004 period brought signs of the V4’s intensification in terms of political rhetoric as well*. This applies to statements that evaluated the V4 and also those dealing with the cooperation’s future. Hungarian PM Orbán explicitly stated that he saw the centre-right governments’ entering in office in 2010 as a sign of Central Europe’s renewal and that there was a “strong demand for building a system of Central European cooperation”.<sup>46</sup> Slovakian PM Iveta Radičová, one of the conservative or centre-right leaders elected in 2010, spoke about further intensifying the cooperation in the future; Polish PM Donald Tusk said Central Europe should set an example for the EU to “respond to challenges posed by the crisis with courageous reforms”<sup>47</sup> and also spoke, in general terms, about the importance of continued solidarity among the V4 states; Polish and Slovakian presidents Komorowski and Gašparovič also talked about the increasing significance of the V4 on the regional and the intra-EU level. However, it has to be added that political affiliation did not seem to be the only, or the most significant, factor behind the intensification: Robert Fico, incumbent Slovakian prime minister in office from April 2012, is a social democrat, and he is among the actors to whom several pro-Visegrád statements are attributable. In terms of rhetoric, a remarkable novelty since the V4’s alleged renaissance in 2010 is

the strong presence of a rhetorical line primarily represented by Viktor Orbán and his government about the exceptional potential of Central Europe to become the “engine of future European growth”, which is also said to necessitate closer regional cooperation by strengthening of the V4. Some statements of actors from the other three countries have also implied agreement with this message (but clearly it has primarily been Mr Orbán and Hungarian political figures who have been the most outspoken representatives of this idea).

In sum, the participating states’ political leaders, regardless of national and political belonging, have acknowledged and underlined in their own statements that the V4’s significance has been on the rise, and they have constantly committed themselves to further cooperation. As far as the expectations or proposals about creating some kind of vision for Visegrád are concerned, *however, the examination of rhetoric has not confirmed the presence of an intention among the V4 leaders to conceive a vision or strategy for the V4, regardless of the perceived increasing significance of regional cooperation. Consequently, rhetoric has not yet involved any concrete ideas in this respect.* It remains to be seen whether this will change in the longer run—which is, this essay argues, much more probable than it was a decade ago—but in the near future Visegrád will most probably remain focussed on a project- or issue-based flexible cooperation.

#### CONCLUSION: COOPERATION AS THE NORMAL STATE OF AFFAIRS IN CENTRAL EUROPE

Based on the comprehensive analysis about post-accession Visegrád Cooperation partly presented above, it is fair to say that today’s V4 is alive and well, having the potential to continue being a fundamental framework for regional cooperation in Central Europe. The initiative had not only survived the four states’ EU-accession but was revived and reinforced. It has proven since then that cooperation has become the standard state of affairs in Central Europe, even if the V4 is not all-encompassing and automatic, and is not a tool for eradicating bilateral problems (but in fact these have never been goals of the V4). As to successfulness in light of the minimum and optimum criteria introduced earlier, the V4 has definitely fulfilled the minimum requirement (cooperation structures were maintained and the participants have showed willingness to ensure regularity and produce input) in the post-2004 period, and the optimum requirement (cooperation

produces actual output, to the satisfaction of all four states) has also usually been met, with exceptions where diverging views have not enabled joint action.

As far as V4-related non-political perceptions are concerned, research showed that 1) many observers see the V4 as something more than a volatile platform for occasional exchange of opinion, 2) Visegrád has been surrounded by a sentimental supportive environment in the V4 elites (especially in the early phase), 3) there seems to be general agreement about Visegrád's increased significance after 2004 (supported by observations about the V4's elite-socialising effect and contribution to a pragmatic political Visegrád-identity), and 4) the perceived increase in significance and successfulness has contributed to a growing V4-awareness and also growing expectations, especially as regards intra-EU cooperation. Research about V4-related political statements in the post-accession period has yielded the following results. *The first hypothesis, which said there existed a rich and detailed Visegrád-related political discourse in the sense that the leaders often made statements about the V4 describing its "nature", "essence", importance, successfulness and other features, was disproved.* The low number of such statements (e.g. compared to statements related to concrete issues of cooperation) meant that politicians seemed to have a decisively practical approach to Visegrád. Second, it was expected that the statements examined were generally optimistic and enthusiastic about the V4 and often invoked sentimental factors like a sense of "togetherness" and "regional identity" in Central Europe, interpreting them as facilitators or even inevitable determiners of cooperation. This was only partly proved: *most of the statements were decisively positive about the results, necessity, significance and future prospects of the V4, and none was decisively negative, but V4-related communication did not involve very strong or passionate statements and only a few references to sentimental or non-tangible elements like some regional "fate" and identity-based interconnectedness were found.* Overall, the leaders' communication about Visegrád Cooperation has proved to be mostly practical and restrained, stressing objective interests and potential practical benefits of mutual cooperation. *The third hypothesis, saying there were substantial and/or stylistic dividing lines in the V4-related communication depending on the respective leaders' national and political affiliation, was also disproved.* Both optimistic/enthusiastic and more restrained/neutral statements have been made by actors belonging to the political left and the right alike, and

no link has been found between the content/style of communication and national belonging either. Fourth, it was expected that recent V4-related statements of the leaders confirmed a) the observation about the V4's increasing importance in its alleged renaissance since 2010, and b) the presence of a political intention to formulate some kind of long term vision for Visegrád, which is not yet accompanied by concrete proposals about the initiative's future role. This hypothesis was only partly proved: *while mainstream political statements about the V4's importance and prospects had already been decisively positive before the 2010 government changes, there have indeed been signs of an intensification in the most recent period, in terms of rhetoric as well. However, references to the necessity of some distinct, comprehensive vision or strategy for the V4's future (often brought up in scholarly works) have not been present in high-level political rhetoric. Consequently, no concrete proposals have been made in this respect.* However, the intention to continue and strengthen cooperation has been apparent, and statements mostly focussed on concrete areas and issues where increased future cooperation was desirable. In conclusion, the approach towards Visegrád is apparently positive in the post-EU-accession period, both in academic sources and political statements. Since neither external pressure (which had only been present before the EU-accession) nor popular expectations (which are absent due to low awareness) influence the decision makers towards depicting the V4 more successful and significant than it actually is, pro-Visegrád rhetoric reflects the politicians' true conviction. Consequently, no matter how low-profile it has been, *the V4 has significantly influenced the way of thinking of the Visegrád states' elites about the normal state of affairs in Central Europe towards seeing cooperation as natural and necessary.*

As to substance, Visegrád has proven to be an à la carte cooperation where the potential areas of common interest are rather generally indicated than "set in stone". The cooperation is indeed "flexible in its choice of topics and objectives, as well as the strategic tools to handle them",<sup>48</sup> and coordination and joint action only happens when the particular issue is of interest to all four V4 states, and when joint approach presumably benefits all countries more than individual approaches would. It is to a large extent mistaken to demand tangible results in the strict sense, which are distinctively V4-related. First, as mentioned earlier, the V4 is increasingly producing results that can be labelled tangible by any measure, and second, the impacts of cooperation are mostly long term "soft results". Visegrád cooperation can

actually be found “working »invisibly« in intra-VG networks at the nongovernmental level”,<sup>49</sup> and the micro- and macro-level networks of connections that emerged directly or indirectly because the V4’s activities can be regarded as one of the most important soft results. Although there is currently a favourable academic and political environment for cooperation, the future of the V4 might always be affected by unforeseeable events and/or logically presumable risks. The latter include potential flare-ups of bilateral tensions (e.g. in the Hungarian-Slovak relation) and the negligence of the cooperation framework either because of domestic politics or the international political/geopolitical ambitions of individual states (especially Poland’s middle-power aspirations and Weimar Triangle orientation). However, disagreement on particular issues is not among these risks, as unanimity in all matters is empirically not a requirement for Visegrád’s survival or effectiveness.

The lack of strategic priorities, seen as a problem in some scholarly works, may also pose an “existential threat” to the V4 (which is probably a reason why academics urge the creation of a long-term vision). However, it has to be taken into account that the V4 works different than an organisation with bidding, pre-set goals. Cooperation in the V4 context does not require a high-sounding and comprehensive concept or vision. Experience has shown that the cooperation structures that have organically emerged, along with a pragmatic approach to coordination and a rotating presidency structure that can be interpreted as a system of “fluid strategy-making and execution”, are capable of maintaining cooperation. Provided that expectations towards the V4 are realistic and follow the same practical approach the Cooperation itself does, Visegrád’s successfulness and acceptance is more than promising, and the actual participants of the cooperation seem to be increasingly aware of this.

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<sup>2</sup> STRÁŽAY, Tomáš. 2011 Visegrad—Arrival, Survival, Revival. In *Two Decades of Visegrad Cooperation: Selected V4 Bibliography*, ed. Břetislav Dančák et. al. 17. Bratislava: International Visegrad Fund.

<sup>3</sup> KRON, Robert. 2012 “Thoughts on the Visegrád Group: A View from the Potomac”. *Visegrad Revue* (online). Accessed December 10, 2013. <http://visegradrevue.eu/?p=656>

<sup>4</sup> LENČ, Marek. 2011 “Perspectives of Central Europe Cooperation within the European Union”. *Culturaldiplomacy.org* paper (online). Accessed December 10, 2013. <http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/content/pdf/participant-papers/2011/april/biec-roa-nua/perspectives-of-central-europe-cooperation-within-the-european-union-marek-lenc.pdf>

- <sup>5</sup> The “Sectoral Cooperation” section of the Selected V4 Bibliography, mentioned above, alone contains more than 450 pieces of literature, and this compilation was gathered over two years ago.
- <sup>6</sup> Visegrád Group. 2011 The Bratislava Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Visegrad Group. Accessed December 10, 2013. <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2011/the-bratislava>
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- <sup>12</sup> An official chronology of selected V4 events with the related press releases is available on the Visegrad Group’s website at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar>.
- <sup>13</sup> International Visegrad Fund. Webpage, section „About”, subsection „Basic facts”. Accessed March 22, 2013. <http://visegradfund.org/about/basic-facts/>
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> MARTONYI, János. 2003 “Hogyan tovább, Közép-Európa?” [“Whither Central Europe?”]. *Európai Utas*, Vol. 14, No. 2: 52.
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- <sup>17</sup> IZSAK, Dániel. 2010 *Region in transit: the role of exogenous forces in the resurgence of the Visegrad Group (thesis)*. Budapest: Central European University, 17.
- <sup>18</sup> Quotations in the paragraph are from: HAMBERGER, Judit. 2010 “Közép-Európa politikai dimenziójának megvalósítási kísérlete: a visegrádi együttműködés (V4)” [“Visegrad Cooperation (V4): an attempt to realise Central Europe’s political dimension”]. *Külgügyi Szemle*, 2010/1: 46.
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- <sup>21</sup> For example, at a V4 meeting in 2006, Hungarian PM Gyurcsány and Slovakian PM Fico engaged shortly in a debate about why their planned bilateral meeting about bilateral issues did not take place.

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- <sup>30</sup> V4: Változatlanul hatékony a visegrádi együttműködés [“V4: cooperation continues to be effective”]. *Új Szó* (online), 8 October 2011. Accessed December 10, 2013. <http://uiszo.com/online/kulfold/2011/10/08/v4-valtozatlanul-hatekony-a-visegradi-egyuttmukodes>.
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# REVIEW

## HOW TO TURN CENTRAL EUROPE INTO THE POSTER CHILD OF EU?

Anikó MÉSZÁROS

### INTRODUCTION

In January 2014 a report titled “Central Europe fit for the future – Visegrad Group ten years after EU accession” was published by the Central European Policy Institute (CEPI), Bratislava, and demoseUROPA (dE) – Centre for European Strategy, Warsaw. The report was written by the High Level Reflection Group, created by CEPI and dE in February 2013. The group’s participating members, during their four meetings in 2013, “*explored the main political and economic challenges facing Central Europe, the existing potential for enhanced regional cooperation, and possible elements of a common EU agenda in the future*” (p.2). The report was then drafted by Milan Nič, Executive Director at CEPI, and Paweł Świeboda, President of demoseUROPA.

The report summarises Central Europe’s first ten years in the European Union and intends to give an action plan for the next decade. In order to do so, it discusses several timely topics, such as security and defence policy or energy security issues, in each case giving a snapshot of the current state and formulating suggestions for the future, together with a list of general recommendations at the end of the report.

The first decade is characterised as a success story, not only for Central Europe itself but also for the whole EU, due to the unique historical legacy and the so-called “catch-up” dynamic of the region. The main message of the report is that for the next ten years this, albeit required, will not be enough. Rather, new plans and a new approach are needed in order to use the unique regional opportunities in the most efficient way and to switch

from following the European agenda to more actively formulating it. The most important task, according to the report, is to focus on a new growth model, competitiveness and innovation of the region.

“REFLECTING THEIR PROXIMITY...”

The report specifies which countries are understood as Central Europe in this case: the four Visegrád Group members and Austria, “*which form one economic area and a backbone of a wider Central and Eastern Europe*”(p.8). Reading the text, however, it becomes clear that the authors are not completely convinced about the unity of these five states, or at least they are not yet used to the application of this approach. For example, Austria is very often mentioned individually, as a state with immigration (p.34) and competitiveness (p.16) figures significantly different from the V4 countries, or as a state which could contribute to the International Visegrád Fund (p.18) (but indeed it does not do so) or could do more to be involved in energy security talks (p.23). Rather than referring to it as a member of any group (neither Visegrád Four nor NATO, to mention two), Austria is mostly referred to as an important country the V4 should have closer contacts with, just as with the Nordic or Baltic states (see for example pages 17 and 46 of the report discussing competitiveness and innovation). While there are certainly valid arguments to define Central Europe as in this report, mentioning the five countries in one group is today rather a wish than the current state of affairs. Indeed, a hopefully self-fulfilling recommendation.

“CENTRAL EUROPE SHOULD DO ITS OWN  
HOMEWORK”

The report discusses the challenges and opportunities ahead, topic by topic, grading the present situation and formulating recommendations in each case.

Starting with growth, competitiveness and innovation, the risk of “half-wayism” or the “middle-income trap” is emphasised (p.16). According to the report, the region has to refashion its growth model, which requires a systemic change. The capital markets of the region are immature and fragmented, although a capital-market hub is much desired. The Visegrád countries are relatively weak in the area of innovation, where more engagement from Austria and the Nordic countries is hoped as well as

better use of the EU's macroregional strategies (for the Danube and for the Baltic Sea region). Cross-border cooperation among research centers is in an initial phase at the moment. At the same time, modernisation of the education system and more engagement of private industry is urgent in order to feed the labour market with a well-trained next generation of workforce.

Regional infrastructure connections are graded as "mission unaccomplished" in the report (p.19). While roads have developed quite much since the EU accession, the rail system is still in a miserable shape. Transport connections still need to improve and integrate to link the key economic centers of the region in order to make regional economic integration possible. EU cohesion and regional funds can be better used in this regard but synchronised national and trans-regional infrastructure projects are also necessary.

The same applies to energy security. While at the political level the signs of cooperation and the results are encouraging, and the European Commission also supports these efforts, there is still a lot to do. Most of all to integrate the region's gas markets, in order to decrease dependency on Russia's Gazprom, first by letting actors from outside enter national gas markets. Electricity markets need integration as well. Moreover, dismantling bureaucratic barriers and even more political will are required.

Surprisingly at first sight, security and defence policy, which is often an area of mistrust, shows an increasing level of cooperation in Central Europe. Although the region has experience in promoting collaboration in the NATO and EU framework, lately Visegrád defence cooperation has also started to take shape. While the V4 countries have different motivations (Poland is willing to spend on modernisation of its military and seeks a leading role in European security policy, while the other three mostly struggle with budget issues and want to save money through cooperation), several factors explain the willingness to an enhanced defence cooperation. These include the need of burden-sharing (with the US decreasing its military presence in Europe), modernisation challenges and a number of possible cooperation areas, such as joint trainings and exercises, mutual defence planning, cyber-defence or military education.

When it comes to governance issues, however, the shortcomings are explained with "*Central Europe's historical legacy*" (p.27) which is indeed a handy argument. At the same time, however, a general reform fatigue and

a larger European crisis of democratic governance are also mentioned as causes. This historical legacy prevented consolidation of democratic norms and institutions but also trained Central European voters to be more patient regarding crises and democracy building. While some good practices in transparency development are mentioned in the report (p.28), more characteristic recommendations are missing. Central Europe has certainly still a lot to do in the field of good governance.

Concerning societies, a number of issues pose great challenges to Central European countries, often with no solution in sight. One of them is demography: decreasing populations and aging with no increase in fertility rates and at most modest immigration will call for increasing retirement ages and (because of the lack of financial resources) cutting public services sooner or later. Regional differences in development and in equality of opportunity, with advanced cities flourishing but regions of the periphery lagging behind are another challenge. Furthermore, urban policies for the region's more important cities are still lacking and are therefore highly desired. Although immigration is not significant in the region, the need for immigration strategies and the reform of asylum policies is also mentioned in the report (p.35). Moreover, the Roma population, with its much brighter demographic data and its huge theoretical potential for the labour market, remains to be a problem until a political will formulates to solve unemployment and discrimination issues, among others. To sum up, there remains a lot to do to build an "*open, inclusive and fair society*" (p.30)—and a sustainable one.

## ENDING THE MYTH OF POLISH PLUMBERS

The report discusses Central Europe's position in the European Union in a separate chapter. It starts with emphasising that the original East-West divide has now become a North-South one and that Central European countries are not newcomers in the EU any more. Instead, today "New Europe" describes the countries which "*regardless of their history, show the capacity for social and political innovation*" (p.11). The region's main task is said to take a switch from adjusting to existing rules towards agenda-setting in a post-crisis European Union, considering Central European interests.

The relations to Germany, the most important partner of Central Europe, are discussed separately. Thanks to socio-economic connections (such as

seasonal workers), in the course of time political relations became close as well. On the one hand, these should be qualitatively deepened, on the other hand, the good relationship with Germany should be seen as a starting point and should lead to other prosperous contacts as well, according to the report.

Regarding the approach to the euro, the report formulates three possible scenarios for Central Europe to follow. One is completing the region's accession to the euro zone, another is putting the question on hold until the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) is reconstructed. The third scenario would also be not-joining, with two possible focuses instead: either concentrating on partnership opportunities outside the EU, or becoming very ambitious and starting to speak about something else. That is supposed to be such an aggressive and ambitious EU agenda that "*our assertive efforts help to blunt political controversy over euro zone accession*" (p.40).

Other issues with the European Union are restoring growth and revitalisation of the EU's economic model, re-launching the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and the future model of integration. Regarding the latter, Central European countries should take steps against strengthening of the intergovernmental method of nowadays, which favours big EU states. To sum up the EU-related recommendations: the self-confidence Central Europe has accumulated in the last 10 years should now start delivering results in several different fields, mostly in "*more active EU policy-making and stronger shaping of the EU's future agenda*" (p.47).

## CONCLUSIONS

The most important recommendations of how to increase the political and economic strength of Central Europe are once more listed at the end of the report. They summarise the report's main message: after ten years spent as "new" members of the European Union, while following the rules of the "old" members, now is the time for Central European countries to redefine themselves and their goals, to start a more active and more cooperative approach, and to reach a higher level of influence in EU decision-making.

This main idea sounds very encouraging and indeed logical. Following such an ambitious, fresh approach, given the economic and political potential lying in these countries, such a goal could be achievable—at least in theory.

In practice, however, the probability of success is unfortunately quite low. Central European countries tend to cooperate not when there is a window of opportunity but when there is no other way forward. Still, such recommendations have to be spelled out and repeated often, even if the chance of realisation is low, because this is the way to reach the highest possible success.

Under the umbrella of this approach, then, the report discusses several issues. These issues give the impression that they are the result of a brainstorming session: they form a mosaic, sometimes closely, sometimes loosely related to each other. The good news is that following these mosaic recommendations, partial achievements are possible: in some areas cooperation and development can flourish while others continue to be ignored. The bad news is, however, that partial achievements will not be enough to formulate that whole new approach the report calls for. For example, economic and financial measures must be closely synchronised in order to have an influence on the respective policy areas in the European Union.

In order to reformulate Central Europe, its countries, first of all at the highest political level, will have to turn towards cooperation—sometimes at the cost of abandoning their own national interests. The question is whether these countries are ready to do so.

Some of the policy recommendations formulated in the report might seem obvious and must be implemented sooner or later. Others are already on their way. Some of them, however, as motivating as they sound, will require such an incredible amount of courage (and leading political personalities with a clear vision and determination) from Central European countries that we can only hope for.

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